



Mood of '30s in 'Last Tycoon'

"The Last Tycoon" (R) brings to the screen F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, published in 1941, a year after his death. It deals with Hollywood during the '30s. The director, Elia Kazan, and the scriptwriter, Harold Pinter, have shown rare sensitivity to the original source in transforming the flavor and feel of Fitzgerald's novel into a movie.

Fitzgerald is a difficult writer to adapt to the motion picture medium, as evident in screen versions of "The Great Gatsby" and "Tender Is the Night." There is a romanticism about his characters which makes them more poetic than real.

There is a distant, enigmatic quality about this movie too. It's the same quality which pervades the book and its protagonist, Monroe Stahr. Stahr is an important motion picture producer whose life is critically intertwined with the industry he helped build. Yet his problems and aspirations remain opaque. Viewing this movie is like overhearing a fragment of someone else's conversation. You don't know how it got started or how it will end.

Although "The Last Tycoon" is in color, there are numerous black and white scenes within it. They represent movies in production at the studio. The contrasts are startling and effective.

"The Last Tycoon" is subtle and low-key. The film clips within it, reflective of pictures made during the '30s, are farcical melodramas, simplistic to the point of being morose.

THEY MAKE "The Last Tycoon" look great in comparison, but they also introduce a paradox. Why is Monroe Stahr, the production genius-in-residence, so serious about producing such crap? It's as if a master chef concerned himself with making pudding from a package.

There's an episode in the movie suggesting that Stahr has higher standards. He announces to startled studio execs that he will produce a movie which will lose money but have artistic value. Unfortunately, we never really learn much about this side of Stahr.

In the book, Fitzgerald tells readers that Stahr is a magnetic and forceful personality. An author can say these things, a movie must show them.

This movie implies Stahr's qualities, it never captures them. Robert De Niro who plays Stahr is an actor of undoubted ability as he demonstrated in "Taxi Driver" and "The Godfather, Part II," but his characterization of Stahr is elusive and weak. Stahr is supposed to be a commanding personality, yet when Jack Nicholson appears as Brimmer, the union organizer, he easily dominates every scene he plays with De Niro.

Nicholson appears late in the film when a new theme is introduced belatedly, a struggle for power within the studio. Here the movie takes license with the author's notes to hurriedly resolve the struggle and conclude the movie.

THERE ARE some individually brilliant scenes in "The Last Tycoon." One is when Stahr and Brimmer first meet. Another occurs when Tony Curtis as the studio's premier actor, comes to Monroe with an embarrassing personal problem. Both episodes are constructed so that lengthy silences, repetitions and clichés become eloquent revelations of mood and character.

However, after two hours and 15 minutes of "The Last Tycoon," Stahr is as much an enigma as at the beginning. The movie captures the mood, but not the man. And it does so in more time than it takes to read this short novel.

GLIMPSES

NEW RELEASES

THE CASSANDRA CROSSING (R). A ridiculous melodrama about a plague-ridden train, a shaky bridge and a staunch colonel who has to make "tough decisions." Big names in this big turkey.

THE ENFORCER (R). Violence and gun play in the "Dirty Harry" manner as Clint Eastwood shoots it out with a terrorist gang in San Francisco in this third film in the series.

FREAKY FRIDAY (G). Disney movie about a mother and her teenage daughter who change roles (and bodies) for a day. Lots of fun and a little insight as each learns about the other's problems.

FUN WITH DICK & JANE (PG). Jane Fonda and George Segal in a snappy social satire about an unemployed engineer and his wife who turn to crime when he can't find a job and they flunk welfare.

KING KONG (PG). The big ape is back again with his same old destructive but sensitive personality. Jessica Lange plays the love in his life. Revised version with some tongue-in-cheek dialogue.

NETWORK (R). Fierce satire attacking the television industry and mass media generally. Top performances by Peter Finch, Faye Dunaway and William Holden in fast paced, grimly humorous film.

ROCKY (PG). Human warmth and exciting drama combine in this stirring film about a no-name boxer who gets a chance at a title bout. Acting accolades to entire cast and especially Stallone as Rocky.

THE SENTINEL (R). Another yarn where supernatural horrors unravel in a New York brownstone where the forces of good and evil clash.

SILVER STREAK (PG). Gene Wilder, Richard Pryor, Patrick McGookin and Jill Clayburgh make tracks in this comedy-thriller about murder and mayhem on a train, and sometimes off.

A STAR IS BORN (R). Long-awaited remake with Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson as rock stars (rather than movie stars) whose careers head in different directions.

TWILIGHT'S LAST GLEAMING (R). A thriller about terrorists who take over a U.S. missile silo, thereby possessing the clout to hold the country at bay and demand some heavy ransom.

VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED (PG). Moving story of a historic incident about a ship filled with Jews expelled from Hitler's Germany who are denied haven in free countries.

MOVING RATING GUIDE

G General audiences admitted.
PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.
X No one under 18 admitted.

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